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A whole community approach to emergency management: Strategies and best practices of seven community programs

Robyn K. Sobelson, PhD,

Behavioral Scientist, Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia

Corinne J. Wigington, MPH,

Health Scientist, Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia

Victoria Harp, BA, and

Consultant, Lockheed Martin Inc, Atlanta, Georgia

Bernice B. Bronson, MPH

Senior Program Officer, The National Foundation for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia

Abstract

Objective—In 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published the Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management: Principles, Themes, and Pathways for Action, outlining the need for increased individual preparedness and more widespread community engagement to enhance the overall resiliency and security of communities. However, there is limited evidence of how to build a whole community approach to emergency management that provides real-world, practical examples and applications. This article reports on the strategies and best practices gleaned from seven community programs fostering a whole community approach to emergency management.

Design—The project team engaged in informal conversations with community stakeholders to learn about their programs during routine monitoring activities, site visits, and during an in-person, facilitated workshop. A total of 88 community members associated with the programs examples contributed. Qualitative analysis was conducted.

Results—The findings highlighted best practices gleaned from the seven programs that other communities can leverage to build and maintain their own whole community programs. The findings from the programs also support and validate the three principles and six strategic themes outlined by FEMA.

Conclusions—The findings, like the whole community document, highlight the importance of understanding the community, building relationships, empowering action, and fostering social capital to build a whole community approach.

Keywords

emergency management; whole community; best practices

INTRODUCTION

Both natural and human-caused disasters have become more common and more severe. Hurricane Katrina, Super Storm Sandy, and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill affected large geographic areas and had devastating human, economic, social, and health effects.^{1–5} The United States federal government supports state and local authorities in the management of domestic disasters by providing resources if the local community is overwhelmed. However, recent largescale disasters have shown that disaster planning and response requires more resources and support than the government can provide.^{6–8} Planning, response, and recovery from a disaster is most effective when members of a community form partnerships in advance and work collaboratively with the government.^{9,10}

In 2011, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published the *Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management: Principles, Themes, and Pathways for Action*,¹¹ which is a framework that outlines the need for increased individual preparedness and more widespread community engagement (eg, residents, emergency management, community leaders, and government officials) to enhance the overall resiliency and security of communities. The approach defines three principles and six strategic themes (see Table 1) that can guide emergency managers as they determine how to incorporate a whole community approach. The principles and themes focus on understanding a community's needs, empowering community members, and strengthening effective daily community practices.¹¹ The framework is not designed to be a “how-to” guide, but rather a starting point that may lead to further discussions on how to implement a whole community approach.

The concept of whole community organizing is not new. For example, public health programs routinely convene community members and organizations to collaboratively identify innovative strategies to increase social connectivity and improve health outcomes.^{12–16} Within the field of emergency preparedness and response, there is emerging, but limited, evidence on how to build a whole community approach to emergency management. Studies identify strategies to increase different aspects of resiliency, such as understanding disaster complexity, building partnerships, and engaging communities,^{17–19} but such strategies are often broad, and provide few actionable steps. Tools aiding in building a whole community approach to emergency preparedness are being discovered, and range in sophistication from various checklists^{20–22} to an interactive Web site that provides resources to build community resilience.²³ However, these studies and tools provide limited information and descriptions of real community efforts that are being used to foster a whole community approach. This article reports on the strategies and best practices assembled from seven community programs to engage local groups and stimulate self-organizing activities to foster a whole community approach to emergency management.

Overview of the Whole Community project

The FEMA Office of Policy and Program Analysis (OPPA) requested that the National Foundation for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC Foundation), in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response (OPHPR), contribute to the development and implementation of its whole community approach to emergency management. The objectives of the project were to identify, promote, and learn from examples of existing community efforts that exemplify a whole community approach to preparedness and emergency response for the purpose of informing potential, recommended methods for other communities.

A literature review and environmental scan were conducted to identify domestic activities, programs, or initiatives that exemplify the whole community approach. Initially, more than 50 programs were identified and conference calls were held to learn more about the communities' efforts; this information was used to align relevant programs to the three principles and six strategic themes of FEMA's whole community approach to emergency management. As a result, 13 programs were identified for potential funding and rated independently on the following criteria: complexity, innovation, impact, sustainability, and ability for replication. Following the second selection process, seven community programs across the United States (see Table 2) were identified for funding.

These seven programs were designed for the specific purpose of improving a community's preparedness, response, or resiliency to a disaster or event and embodied the principles and strategic themes of FEMA's whole community approach. The programs were funded to continue or expand their own, local whole community work, while serving as "living laboratories" for the purpose of informing a body of knowledge to inform the whole community movement.

METHOD

Learning approach

From the project's inception, it was anticipated that all activities would build and strengthen partnerships, empower local action, celebrate community work, and ultimately create a collective body of knowledge to inform the whole community movement. Given the limited amount of published literature on building a whole community approach for emergency management, an organic, interactive process was created to glean strategies and best practices from the seven programs with minimal disruption to the whole community work they were doing. The intent was not to provide funding to force change of program purpose, mission, or scope, but rather to provide funding to allow the community programs to continue or expand through their own devices. The project team did not evaluate the programs; an unobtrusive learning process was developed and implemented, which put the programs at ease and allowed for more meaningful sharing and dialogue. Thus, the learning approach started as an observational discovery process and ultimately led to an opportunity to identify qualitative themes²⁴ for implementing a whole community approach. While the

process appears informal and organic, the framework for learning was consistent across all seven programs. Details are described below.

Learning plan

At the beginning of the project, a plan was created to serve as a guide for project-level learning; the learning plan was summative in its design. The purposes of the learning plan were as follows: 1) to describe how the project was implemented and what was produced to inform the development and implementation of similar programs; 2) to identify what community programs produced as a result of the project and describe their short-term outcomes to highlight the specific types of activities that foster a whole community approach; and 3) to describe what works to engage local groups and stimulate their self-organizing activities to provide deeper and more rigorous understanding of how communities can foster a whole community approach. This article focuses only on the methods and results associated with learning plan purpose three. Learning plan questions were organized using FEMA's six whole community strategic themes.

Procedure

To inform the learning plan, the project team engaged in informal conversations with community programs' stakeholders to learn about their programs during routine monitoring activities (eg, conference calls and final reports), site visits, and during an inperson, facilitated workshop. A total of 88 community members associated with the seven programs contributed. Participation ranged from seven to 20 persons per community program. Stakeholders included community program staff, partners, customers, and supporters. Stakeholders were given the opportunity to contribute from October 2012 through July 2013.

Eighteen of the programs' stakeholders were program staff. Seventy-one represented one of the following groups: program partners (individuals who worked collaboratively with the community programs to implement activities or services; partners had a vested interest in seeing the program activities succeed); champions (individuals who held a leadership role in city or state government that would advocate and support program activities; examples included a member of the city council, state emergency management director, and city administrator); recipients of services; or members of an advisory board. Of these 71, stakeholders represented themselves or their local neighborhoods ($n = 18$), emergency management ($n = 13$), the private sector (eg, Le Cordon Bleu; $n = 13$), nonprofit institutions (eg, American Red Cross; $n = 10$), other government entities besides emergency management (eg, public health; $n = 9$), and universities ($n = 7$). Relevant methodological information for each activity is provided below.

Routine monitoring—The seven community programs were monitored to ensure appropriate expenditure of funds and adequate progress. The project team scheduled monthly conference calls and encouraged programs to share information, highlights of their programs, and feedback on the project. In addition, programs were given the opportunity to provide information through applications and reports submitted at the beginning and conclusion of the project.

Site visits—The project team conducted one site visit with each of the seven programs between December 2012 and June 2013. The primary purposes of the site visits were to learn from program staff, partners, and participants about history, operations, community relationships, and to understand how the programs implement a whole community approach to emergency management.

In-person workshop—A one and a half day workshop was hosted in March 2013 at the CDC in Atlanta, GA. Attendees shared their programs' best practices, discussed strategies to replicate, sustain, and build impactful programs, and networked with other participants. Throughout the workshop, each participant actively contributed to five, hour-long facilitated discussions that explored strategies and best practices in establishing and maintaining programs that exemplify a "whole community." Twelve individuals representing the seven programs participated.

Analysis plan

Given the field-based nature of the program and the direct and observational methodologies²⁴ used to learn from the community programs, qualitative analysis was conducted to generate findings. Notes from the site visits and in-person workshop were cleaned and separated by individual comment; comments were also captured through reports submitted at the conclusion of the project. All comments were transferred to Microsoft Excel 2010 and analyzed qualitatively; deductive codes were applied to all comments and aggregated.

Presentation of results

Project findings are categorized below by FEMA's six whole community strategic themes and associated learning plan question. Only topics with frequencies equal to or greater than three are presented due to space considerations. The number of community programs that stated a particular comment within a topic is identified by the nomenclature "(n = x)." Comments provided by program staff, partners, or customers of a particular community program within one topic are counted as one unit of analysis; as a result, "n = 7" is the maximum value throughout the article.

It is important to note that comments were garnered only from informal conversations with program participants and program documents. There were no standardized interview questions or formal documents used, given the project was not designed as research or evaluation. As a result, the project team was responsible for aligning conversation notes to whole community strategic themes, rather than asking specific questions that could distinctly inform each strategic theme. Therefore, the final alignment of a particular result to an appropriate theme was subjective.

RESULTS

How do programs understand community complexity (ST1)?

The programs have taken various approaches to understanding the complexities of their communities. Results indicated that the programs use their communities' available

information systems and data at the neighborhood, city, or state-level (eg, school data, city bus routes, and city-conducted surveys; $n = 7$), they recognize and address all demographics of a population living, working, or visiting a community; demographics may include vulnerable populations (children, older adults, and individuals with access or functional disabilities), those without private transportation, homeless population, refugees, and non-English speaking individuals ($n = 7$), and identify and work closely with community members who can provide specific information about the community, its policies, and its organizations ($n = 5$). In addition, programs acknowledge the culture and the value system of the community ($n = 5$). For example, one program stated that, “art and music are a large cultural part of the city of New Orleans. EvacuSpots will integrate into this already established culture.” Programs also use differences in levels of preparedness (perceived or actual) as a criterion to target services (eg, rural vs urban preparedness and younger vs older populations; $n = 4$) and become subject matter experts on a community’s geographic landscape and potential risks ($n = 3$) to understand, or better understand, the complexities within their community.

How do programs recognize the actual needs and collective capabilities of the community (ST2)?

The programs recognize and appreciate the actual needs and collective capabilities of the community to build and sustain their whole community programs. The programs reported that they are sensitive to the standard challenges within the field of preparedness and response, including citizens’ often unreasonable expectations of government assistance in an emergency and frequent distrust in government entities ($n = 6$), and use lessons learned from past large-scale disasters, exercises, or smaller events in the community (eg, After Action Reports; $n = 5$). Programs also reported that they recognize needs and capabilities by understanding the various types of services (eg, medical, social, and public health) available within a community, including how they are integrated ($n = 4$), as well as by utilizing subject matter experts as consultants to collect, analyze, or report specific information about needs and capabilities ($n = 3$).

How do programs foster relationships with community leaders (ST3)?

The programs must foster relationships with leaders in their community to build impactful programs. Results indicated that programs ensure that program activities align with the priorities of community leaders, both elected and nonelected ($n = 6$), invite leaders to play a key role in established, multiorganizational advisory committees ($n = 6$), and actively pursue relationships with leaders who have experienced a past disaster or have a personal connection to preparedness ($n = 6$), or who serve as strong community advocates ($n = 4$).

How do programs build and maintain multiorganizational partnerships (ST4)?

Programs recognize the importance of building and maintaining multiorganizational partnerships within their communities. Results suggested that they exchange resources (eg, funding, facilities, or promotion) to mutually benefit both partners ($n = 7$), establish a network through which community partners can connect and collaborate with one another ($n = 6$), and seek partners who have the same community interests as the program ($n = 6$). In addition, they build and maintain multiorganizational partnerships by offering meaningful

incentives for partners (n = 5) and establishing an environment in which partners are encouraged to provide feedback (n = 3).

How do programs empower local action (ST5)?

Results suggested that programs are able to empower local action within their community in several ways. They effectively utilize community leaders and partners as conduits to reach the program's target population; these conduits serve as program extenders by forging connections with hard-to-reach communities, distributing materials, encouraging community participation, and educating peers (n = 7). In addition, the programs offer incentives to participants (eg, promotional items and food; n = 7), including hosting formal, community recognition events for participants, volunteers, and staff (n = 5). One program stated, "The Neighborhood Empowerment Network (NEN) awards are designed to elevate and celebrate the community leaders. We could not do our job without these people doing what they do every day."

Programs also empower local action by ensuring individuals' participation in the program is convenient and easy (n = 7), by serving as a trusted resource for accurate preparedness-related information through Web sites, in-person trainings or presentations, and written materials (n = 7), by purposefully holding meetings within local communities (eg, churches and community centers; n = 6), and by providing needed services such as technical assistance and individual consultation (n = 5).

How do programs leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets (ST6)?

The programs leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets to build and maintain their whole community efforts. Results suggested that the programs effectively use traditional media (radio, television, and print) and social media (Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn) to distribute preparedness messages and promote programs (n = 7), and use established community groups and existing community efforts to promote programs (n = 5). For example, Project Wildfire "utilizes pre-existing groups to get the message out. It does not matter if it is in a church, backyard, or neighborhood watch. There is a Boy Scout leader in la Pine who sends messages through her group." Programs also leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets by capitalizing on small-scale emergencies to teach lessons in preparedness and response (n = 3) and by integrating program activities into current community initiatives with a goal of infusing preparedness and response (n = 3).

DISCUSSION

The seven programs embody a whole community approach to emergency management. The findings provide best practices and useful methods in which to achieve the strategic themes (ie, the "how to") that other communities can leverage to build and maintain their own whole community programs. The findings also support and validate the six strategic themes outlined in FEMA's *Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management*.¹¹ The findings, like the whole community document, highlight the importance of understanding

the community, building relationships, empowering action, and fostering social capital to build a whole community approach.

FEMA's whole community principles and strategic themes are purposefully broad and serve as an introduction to their concepts. Current project findings suggested that there are many overlapping and common ideas among the broad, strategic themes. A program was likely to be using similar methods or strategies for many strategic themes (ie, the methods identified for understanding community complexity were similar to those identified for recognizing capabilities and needs). For example, programs offer incentives not only as a way of building and maintaining multiorganizational partnerships but also as a way to empower local action.

It is important to note that when prompted, programs were able to describe the specific strategies they regularly use to implement FEMA's six strategic themes in building a whole community approach, even though they did not typically think of their programs' activities in the context of the formal framework.

Limitations

There were several limitations of the current project. The project team relied heavily on FEMA's fairly broad, documented strategic framework to build and implement the program. As a result, the project was designed based on the project team's subjective interpretation of FEMA documents, as well as a limited amount of published literature. In addition, the project included a small sample size and was based on self-report. No attempt was made to decrease potential bias.

CONCLUSIONS

Through site visits, the in-person workshop, and routine program monitoring, the project team observed and learned from programs, partners, and participants engaged in a whole community approach to emergency management (note that these elements are not presented in the Results section because they were not specifically stated by participants, but rather observed by the project team). The project team's observations suggested that the following are common, key elements that are instrumental in creating and sustaining successful programs exemplifying a whole community approach:

- Program leadership is passionate about the community they serve. Leaders personally identify and connect with the communities in which they live and work. Many have experienced disaster in their local community and participated in the recovery.
- Program leadership consists of a visionary and a realist; the two roles complement each other and both are critical to the program's success. The visionary leaders are charismatic and passionate risk takers who are critical to program start-up efforts. They physically enter neighborhoods, meet with community members individually, motivate the community, and encourage action. The realist leaders are consistent, reliable, organized, and skilled project managers; they maintain the program's business operations.

- There is dedicated staff or volunteers for relationship building.
- Programs host social community events. Community events, such as barbeques and recognition ceremonies, provide an informal opportunity for programs to offer education, recruit volunteers and participants, recognize staff, and add an element of fun.
- Programs are creative, simple, and fun. They strategically created programs that are enjoyable and convenient for the enduser.
- Programs work with nontraditional partners. They successfully partner with local chefs, an arts council, and faith-based institutions. Working with community organizations not typically tied to preparedness helps extend the program's reach beyond a preparedness and response audience.
- Programs incorporate a community's culture. It is crucial to understand, leverage, and integrate program activities into a community's culture.

It is intended that lessons learned from this project will inform the next iteration of the whole community movement. FEMA's whole community principles and strategic themes are purposefully broad and serve as an introduction to their concepts. However, current project findings suggested that an updated, more practice-based organizing structure for building a whole community approach is recommended.

In addition, as the practice community continues to work toward implementing a whole community approach, a more detailed, implementation guide would be useful. This step-by-step guide outlining key elements to building a whole community approach may appeal to a broader, more practice-based audience. This guide should be informed by the findings assembled from the seven community programs. In addition, although FEMA's principles and strategic themes provide a framework for the Whole Community approach, they do not provide the analytical tools needed to quantify the preparedness of the whole community. Future work may include the innovative quantitative and qualitative methodologies to measure resilience of the whole community.

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Table 1

FEMA's whole community approach: principles (P) and strategic themes (ST)

P1	Understand and meet the actual needs of the whole community
P2	Engage and empower all parts of the community
P3	Strengthen what works well in communities on a daily basis
ST1	Understand community complexity
ST2	Recognize community capabilities and needs
ST3	Foster relationships with community leaders
ST4	Build and maintain partnerships
ST5	Empower local action
ST6	Leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets

Table 2

Overview of seven promising examples

Program	Description
Do1Thing Emergency Preparedness Program, Lansing, MI	A free, web-based program that encourages individuals to take one small step each month to become better prepared.
Emergency Kit Cook-Off, Phoenix, AZ	The cook-off arouses thinking about preparedness through community participation and challenges celebrity chefs and home cooks to create recipes using the contents of an emergency kit.
The Independent Living Center, Inc. (TILC), Joplin, MO	TILC is dedicated to assisting people with access and functional needs achieve goals for more independent living. TILC continues to expand the emergency preparedness services they provide.
EvacuSpots, New Orleans, LA	Developed by Evacuteer.org, EvacuSpots is a public art project that offers permanent markers of New Orleans' 17 evacuation pickup points.
Project Wildfire, Deschutes County, OR	Project Wildfire programs provide preparedness initiatives to further strengthen the disaster-readiness of the central Oregon community against the yearly threat of wildfire.
Partners in Preparedness, New York, NY	Partners in Preparedness challenges private, not-for-profit, and government organizations to complete five preparedness actions to receive a "Partners in Preparedness" seal.
Resilient Diamond Heights Project, San Francisco, CA	The Resilient Diamond Heights Project provides the structural, social, and economic opportunities to improve resilience through partnerships with the nonprofit, government, private, and academic communities.